



## Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain

**49 | Automne/hiver 2017**  
**CRITIQUE D'ART 49**

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# Yve-Alain Bois

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/27148>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.27148

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

### Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

### Printed version

Date of publication: 21 November 2017

Number of pages: 59-61

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

### Electronic reference

Denys Riout, « Yve-Alain Bois », *Critique d'art* [Online], 49 | Automne/hiver 2017, Online since 21 November 2018, connection on 22 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/27148> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.27148

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This text was automatically generated on 22 April 2019.

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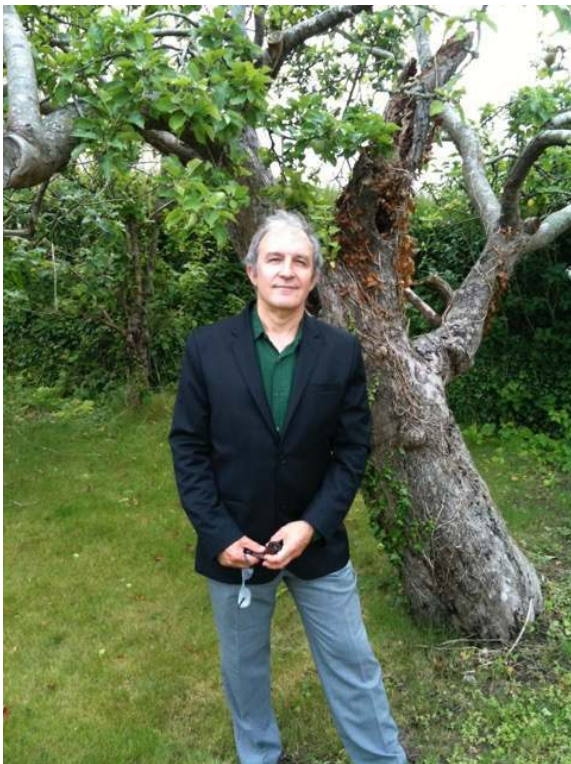
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**YVE-ALAIN BOIS, 2010 © D.R., WITH COURTESY OF YVE-ALAIN BOIS**

- 1 Disgusted by the way art history was being taught in French universities, Yve-Alain Bois enrolled in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), where Roland Barthes supervised first his degree and then his dissertation.<sup>1</sup> On Barthes' advice, he also attended Hubert Damisch's seminar. Deeply involved in that intellectual ferment, he met Jacques Derrida, read Claude Lévi-Strauss and Walter Benjamin, was introduced to linguistics, and discovered Meyer Shapiro, then little known in France, among many

others. It is fairly evident that Y.-A. Bois, who was nurtured on the human sciences, was (almost) self-taught as far as art history is concerned. His admiration for Piet Mondrian's works and the works of the Russian avant-gardes set him in good stead. As a teenager, the historian-to-be wanted to become an artist, and he produced paintings. This familiarity helped to construct his approach, which is based on a removed vision, tinged with theories, and a close-up way of looking at things, examining the material nature of the work and the process behind its making.

- 2 In 1976, together with Jean Clay, Y.-A. Bois (born in 1952) founded the magazine *Macula*. The first issue published a translation of "Unizm w malarstwie [Unism in Painting]" (Władysław Strzemiński, 1928). Y.-A. Bois introduced it and also signed an article titled "Malevitch, le carré, le degré zéro". The magazine was militant in its own way, translating important writings and disseminating analyses that were either new or unknown to French-speaking readers. Y.-A. Bois would subsequently join the editorial board of the American magazine *October*, also a pioneering publication. Everything, and in particular his free tone, suggests that his education contributed to that same spirit. After working from 1977 to 1983 as a researcher at the CNRS (National Centre of Scientific Research), he went to Johns Hopkins University in the United States, then proceeded to Harvard in 1991, before ending up at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, in 2005.
- 3 The relatively short form of the essay focusing on one or more works suited his incisive and very direct style down to the ground. He duly published many articles in *Critique* and *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*. His studies appeared in foreign magazines such as *October*, in exhibition catalogues and in collective publications<sup>2</sup>, but were not by any means all translated into French (many of them have been milestones, and some have been published as a collection).<sup>3</sup> His writings have to do above all with abstract art, the avant-gardes of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, and artists such as Barnett Newman, Robert Ryman and Martin Barré, not forgetting Ellsworth Kelly, the *catalogue raisonné* of whose work he has started to publish.<sup>4</sup> Others artists have caught his attention, too, in particular Richard Serra, Donald Judd and, perhaps more unexpectedly, Lygia Clark and Sophie Calle.
- 4 Yve-Alain Bois has also devised exhibitions. The show devoted to Piet Mondrian has a lasting effect on art-lovers who were lucky enough to see it.<sup>5</sup> Another show, *L'Informe : mode d'emploi*,<sup>6</sup> drew on Georges Bataille and showed a desire to get beyond the antagonism between style and content. This desire informs all the works of this most French of American art historians and critics.

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## NOTES

1. His degree (1973) dealt with the *Histoire de deux carrés* (El Lissitzky, 1922), while his doctoral thesis was titled *Lissitzky, Malevitch et la question de l'espace* (1977).

2. For example, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (with Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh), New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

3. *La Peinture comme modèle*, Genève : Mamco, 2017. Ed. et trad. de Ginette Morel

4. The first volume appeared in 2015 : *Ellsworth Kelly : Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Reliefs, and Sculpture, Volume One, 1940-1953*, Paris : Cahiers d'Art, 2015.
5. *Piet Mondrian*, The Hague: Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1994 ; then at the National Gallery in Washington and at the MoMA in New York.
6. Devised in collaboration with Rosalind Krauss, this show was held at the Centre Pompidou from 22 May to 26 August 1996.